

Alex picked a landing lot a few blocks away from the station. The station had its own landing area, but Alex needed to acquire the last piece of his disguise on the way. He'd already changed into clothing more appropriate for a vid producer: plain pants, a white shirt, and a pale gray jacket due to the cool weather. None of it armored at any level worth mentioning. He'd his own boots because they were comfortable, and had a built-in sheath.

More importantly, he took off the harness. He still had two knives on him—one in the boot sheath, and one at the small of his back. The one in the hidden forearm sheath was made of undetectable polycarbon, so it didn't count. The other two were vibro and mono-edge, respectively. He wished he could have had the jacket altered so he could carry more hidden knives; he felt barely dressed with only three.

He locked the hover on exiting it, and stopped on the way to the station to buy the last piece of his costume: a large drink. He made it a nutrient-enhanced energy booster since his research showed that was the preferred drink of producers. Something about them never taking the time to eat while a vid was in production.

The station building was tall with multiple communications antennas and dishes on the roof. Otherwise it looked like any other corporate building—some form of reflective material interrupted with beams to allow the structure to survive an earthquake and the occasional planetary storm—did this planet get those?—and any attack a rival might launch at them.

This station was named Quadrillian, and proudly displayed the name at the top. The first owner had named it after herself, but it had been centuries, objective, since it had slipped through her fingers. Since then it had been sold back and forth among the thousands of corporations that had an interest in vid distribution, like it was a token handed over as a favor.

On the way, he did his best to change the how he walked. He was no longer a merc, so he didn't have to be ready to bolt for safety, or reach for a knife. He was a vid producer. The only people he had after him were exes who wanted a larger piece of his money. He was a happy man, he reminded himself. He needed to smile and be relaxed.

At least Tristan wasn't here to comment on how poorly he was doing this, he thought, as he plastered a smile on his face.

It hurt by the time he crossed the block and a half left and entered the building. He took a sip of the drink as he headed for the lifts, and tried not to show how ready he was to take on the approaching guard.

"Sir," the woman called, "please stop."

A few people looked at her at the same time Alex did, but decided she wasn't interested in them. He acted confused while trying to figure out what had given him away. He pointed to himself.

"Yes, you." Her tone wasn't as harsh as he expected from someone about to escort him off the property, but it was still stern.

He stopped moving. The smile wouldn't stay on as hard as he tried. It was a good thing the drink was in his main hand, because all he wanted to do was reach for the knife at his back. It couldn't be Pantor that had triggered an alarm; his cover was perfect. The only way anyone would ever find out that Pantor was a creation was to already want to have a reason to go looking that deep into his identity for something to destroy him. Pantor might have a few exes who wanted to do that, but no one real.

The guard stopped before him. She was attentive, but not tense.

"Is there a problem?" His tone was so jovial, he couldn't understand why the guard wasn't pulling out the baton at her belt.

"You registered as armed. It's company policy to verify every weapon that comes in. We run a safe workplace here."

Alex hesitated, then reached back and unclipped the sheath, the vibro-blade. He handed it pommel-first. He tried to be casual as he looked around. He couldn't see any detector, and there had been no notes about any kind of weapon scanners on the plans. They'd only been a few years old. Something new? Something they didn't want officially known? The only place that made sense for them was the entrance.

"This is a military model." Her tone was awed rather than suspicious.

"Polycarbon core, Zaxtek vibrational engine with palm lock and a—"

Her raised eyebrow stopped him.

He silently cursed himself. A producer wouldn't know how a vibro-blade was built. "He made sure I knew the details about it, ad nauseam." He tried to do an eye roll.

"It can't have been cheap."

"It was a gift."

She raised an eyebrow again.

"My first husband—only relationship that had happiness in it. He wasn't an actor. That was for our third anniversary."

"He thought you needed a knife?"

"To keep away all the money-hounds that were after me."

She headed toward the counter. "You said first, so it didn't last?"

"He was in the military. He was deployed the next year and hasn't come back. Argalian marriages are automatically dissolved after three years without contact and—" He shrugged. "—I have needs." He took a sip from his drink; he should have paid extra for the mug that kept the stuff cold. The taste got worse as it warmed. She motioned for him to accompany her when he didn't immediately follow.

"I'm sorry. What's your name?" She placed the knife in a drawer.

"Georges Pantor. In the Dark Productions. I have an appointment with Miss Fiolos to discuss broadcasting rights to the vid I'm producing."

She made a note on the screen, then read something. "She's on the eighteenth floor, office eighteen-forty-three."

"My knife?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you carry it inside the building. I'll hand it back once you're done."

"Alright." He sipped his drink again to keep himself from commenting. If she hadn't asked for his other knife, it meant she didn't know about it. It was a poor sensor that couldn't detect a mono-edge knife. Well, that was good for him if the woman he was meeting hated his idea so much she felt the need to attack him.

He was the only one in the lift, so he put his earpiece in. All he could do was listen in on the system, but there was a lot he could learn that way, if he had the time. All he had the time to gather was that there were three systems working together, three almost identical voices, so the same core processors, only altered by the code dictating their individual functions.

He thought one acted solely as coordinator for the other two, but he was crossing the fifteenth floor by then, and removed the earpiece. Fortunately he had more visits scheduled, which would let him learn everything he needed to know.

* * * * *

The woman wished him a good day as she escorted him out of her office. Alex had a headache from trying to keep everything she'd told him ordered. Maybe he should get a memory installed? If this was what using subterfuge was like, he'd need it.

She'd asked for the plot of the vid, which he made up on the spot, taking elements from his own life and adding stuff he thought would make it more exciting. She hadn't commented, other than to nod when he was done. She'd been silent, and Alex had wondered if he'd gone too far, but then she started talking.

And kept on talking, about the markets his vid could reach, the different ways it could be promoted, the kind of changes it would need depending on the kind of appeal he was aiming for. She proposed a list of actors for the roles he'd created, asking him to give his opinion on them.

He went for sounding confident over accurate, all the while hoping she'd be called out so he could access her terminal and take a look at the system, have a chat with it. It's what he was here for, after all.

But in the forty-five minutes he sat there, she never left. And now, as the lift took him down, he was too dazed to even think of putting the earpiece in and listening to the system.

He took his knife back from the guard, and considered his next step as he headed back to the hover. His next meeting was late in the afternoon. He'd have to change out the vibro-blade for a mono-edge to avoid being noticed again.

With nothing to do until then, he decided to change back in his clothes and look into the security of the Quadrillian building. If he'd missed the sensor, there might have been other details he needed to know about.

He stepped around a large hover in the lot, and stopped as his came into view. Why was the ramp down? He knew he'd closed it and was fairly confident he'd locked it, so what was it doing open?

A woman stepped out of it, laughing. She threw a panel on the ground and said something in a dialect Alex barely understood to someone still inside. She glanced over Alex, then looked back at him. Her expression became serious.

They were stealing from me? Alex thought, not quite believing it.

She yelled something to the person inside.

Alex cursed. He'd paid good money for that hover, from his own account.

She bolted, and Alex threw the knife without having to think about it. As soon as it left his hand, he was running too. She screamed in pain and fell to the ground as a man stepped out of the hover. He saw Alex and fumbled for a knife of his own.

Alex collided with him and slammed him against the wall. "What do you think you're doing?" This close, the man was no more than a teen. Sixteen at best.

He said something in a language Alex didn't understand. SpaceGov was going to be reinforcing the language laws here if it had mutated this much.

"Let him go." The words were heavily accented, but Alex understood those. The girl—was she younger than the boy?—had his knife in her hand. Her leg bled, but not so much Alex worried she'd bleed out.

He could kill this boy before she moved. Have the knife at the small of his back out and in his stomach. A part of him wanted that. Wanted to make one of them pay for interfering with his mission. He buried it. He wasn't Tristan, he wasn't going to hurt kids over an inconvenience.

He threw the boy at her. "You better hope it still flies." She dropped his knife to catch him, and fell down with a yell as she put weight on her injured leg. "If I can't take off, I am going to make you two pay for it. Got me?" He eyed the knife on the ground before closing the ramp.

The front panel was missing, and wires had been pulled out along with components, but as far as he could tell, nothing had been disconnected. There weren't any loose wires, and nothing was strewn about the floor other than his knives. They'd gone through his harness and decided knives weren't all that important. He'd taught them a lesson about that at least.

He looked out the windows and watched them stumble away. The boy was helping her walk. He could go after them and ask what they'd done to his hover. Why they had targeted him. Was this related to the gangs tracking Tristan for the bounty? If it was, he'd have to get a new hover.

As far as he knew, no one had survived the ambush in the deserted town. Tristan would have told him if someone had escaped them. And with the flying he'd done, he doubted anyone could have kept track of them between there and the forest where they were hiding.

There had been his first excursion in the ship, but he'd listened to the gangs' nodes, all of them, and there had been no mention of his flight. They would have jumped at another chance to collect on the bounty.

With a sigh, he started the engine. It came on as it should. He gave it a minute to warm up and for it to give an alarm something was about to fail. When nothing sounded, he eased the hover up and into the city's travel lanes. He debated taking the hover to a repair shop, and having a record of his presence he'd have to make sure to remove, or dealing with Tristan.

It had to be Tristan. This would cause a delay, and he had no way to contact him. He could just imagine what the Samalian was going to have to say about this, and the fact he left two people alive.

At least his leg didn't twitch this time.